

## Peeling Back the Layers of Film

**Overview:** Interpreting film is different from interpreting short stories or novels. Novels have more or less one person who constructs the meaning with one medium: the writer uses words. Films have multiple people who work together to add on multiple mediums: writers, directors, cinematographers, and editors use words, actors, shots, and sounds (to name a few) to get across their meaning/theme. Therefore, in order to interpret film, we have to learn to not only analyze the narrative, but we must also be aware of and analyze how these new layers work to reinforce the narrative.



### 1. The Core Layer: **Narrative**

- a. Explanation: This is the first and most important layer. If the Earth lost its core, the world would end; likewise, if a movie is lacking a good narrative, nothing else really matters. REMEMBER: **All other layers are there to enhance the narrative.**
- b. Constructed by: The Writer/Writers
- c. What to Look For:
  - i. Internal Conflict: How does the Protagonist change/not change by the end of the film?
  - ii. Symbolism: STRP: Look for things that are Surprising, given Too much attention, Repeated, or in Position: beginning, end, climax (focus on dialogue)
  - iii. Indirect Characterization: What do the characters' actions, words, appearance, attitude/inner thoughts, and the reactions of others say about them?
  - iv. Allusions: What connections can you make to your self, other films/texts, or the world?
  - v. **Theme:** How were my feelings manipulated and why? What values/ideology are they selling? How do they want me to view life, people, or the world?

### 2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Layer: **Mise-en-scene**

- a. Explanation: This is everything put into the scene to create the world of the script. (What is in the scene)
- b. Constructed by: The Director
- c. What to Look For:
  - i. Lighting: High? Low? Neutral? Shadows?
  - ii. Actors/Acting: Type cast? Verbal/Non-Verbal shadings? Spacing?
  - iii. Costuming: Symbolic of character?
  - iv. Décor (Scenery, Sets, Props): Create mood? Reflect character emotions?

### 3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Layer: **Cinematography**

- a. Explanation: This is how the stuff in the scene is captured on film.
- b. Constructed by: The Camera Man/Cinematographer
- c. What to Look For:
  - i. Framing/Shot Types: Where in the box? How close? How far away? POV?
  - ii. Camera Angles: Looking up? Looking down? Eye level? Off kilter?
  - iii. Camera Movement: Zoom? Track? Pan? Shaky?

### 4. The Crust: **Editing**

- a. Explanation: The separate shots captured on film are joined together into a single finished filmstrip.
- b. Constructed by: The Editor
- c. What to Look For:
  - i. Cuts: Simple/Dramatic? What is it connecting and why?
  - ii. Sound: Reinforce mood? Creates reality?
  - iii. Visual Effects: CGI? How does it enhance the story?

## Film Language

*Adapted from Steve Campsall's GCSC Film Analysis Guide 2005*

'Film language' describes the way film 'speaks' to its audiences and spectators. Directors, producers and editors work to create meaning from the moving images of film, video and television. Moving images can be entertaining or informative, but they always attempt to persuade us to see the world in a particular way (theme). We 'decode' these meanings in a not dissimilar way to interpreting spoken and written language. As with words, but more so, we don't merely 'read what we see' – we bring to our interpretation of moving images a range of pre-existing expectations, knowledge and shared experiences that shape the meaning we take from what we see.

When we see objects and images or hear/ read words we cannot perceive more than an idea. This idea is what we call "meaning". We have learned to decode this meaning as we grow up and are educated. The important realization is that such meaning is not our own idea but someone else's. For example, if you read the word "coward" you decode it by referring to values that our culture relates both to cowardice and its binary opposite term, heroism.

Simplistically speaking, meaning exists at two "levels": a basic level – called denotation (the literal meaning); and when it occurs in certain contexts, it can also suggest extra meaning- called connotation. For example, a rose denotes a kind of flower; but when handed to a girl by a boy, it also acts to connote romance (and, importantly, in a media text, this would also act to reinforce ways of thinking about how romance 'should' ideally be conducted – one of our society's dominant ideologies/values).

1. **NARRATIVE:** Narratives are stories. They are our way of making sense of our lives and the world. When we want to tell or hear about life, we want to tell it and hear it in the form of a story. This means that we frequently follow a particular form and structure when we tell about things, whether we tell about real or imaginary events. We have learned to use narrative as the means of telling about people and events such that it has become 'hard wired' into our mind as the most interesting way to tell about events in life and the world. Because we have grown so used to using it, narrative has become "transparent", i.e. we don't know we use it. This means we can call it a convention; it seems the natural way to tell of things. The paradox of narrative is that despite massively simplifying reality, it creates the illusion of offering authenticity and truth. A narrative typically begins with a sense that the world is in equilibrium – a calm place; this equilibrium becomes disrupted before eventually returning to a new equilibrium; because we believe that the world should be in a state of calm, we expect any disruption to be resolvable and to be returned to calm. This results in a connected beginning-middle-end structure in which the calm of a 'hero's' world is disrupted by a 'villain'. In the real world, of course, people are never wholly good or wholly evil; life is not necessarily 'naturally' calm and events are never so simply related one to another. But, that's the way we see the world and by presenting a word of people and events in the form of a narrative, media texts work easily to trick us into believing we are being shown a 'window on the world' – reality. **Genre:** Genre is the kind of narrative being told, e.g. Detective or Western. It defines a text by its similarities to other texts. Watching a film, we have many pre-existing memories and expectations regarding characters, settings and events: it is this that helps us enjoy predicting what might happen next and working out where events will lead. Genre allows a director to create seeming realism because we fail to see that what we see is not reality but a media convention. So... in the gangster genre, we don't mind the owner of a casino being horribly killed because we see him, within this genre, as belonging to the side of the 'villain'.
2. **MISE-EN-SCÈNE** (i.e. all that the director 'puts into the scene' and records on camera.) Cinema and TV codes are created within an area bounded by the edges of a screen. What is shown is entirely controlled by the producer or director and by controlling what is in the frame controls the audience or spectators understanding. Asking 'who, what and where' of the characters and objects and their relative positions, expressions, appearance, costume, make-up, scenery, props, lighting, etc. in the mise-en-scene will help you analyze and understand it. What effects are created in a particular mise-en-scene, what meaning do they have (both denotation and connotation), how they have been created and why created that particular way (which is director's purpose – perhaps to develop a character, a mood, the storyline or plot and always to contribute to the exploration a deeper meaning or idea, i.e. a theme).

- a. **Lighting:** High key, neutral, low key Lighting can create atmosphere and mood as well as signify meaning, e.g. in the horror genre, light and shade are codes of meaning. High-key lighting is harsh; soft-key lighting creates romance; spotlighting picks out a character from a group, etc. Available light suggests natural light. Full-face lighting suggests openness and honesty; shadow can suggest fear or lack of trust, and so on.
  - b. **Décor:** The objects contained in and the setting of a scene. Décor can be used to amplify character emotion or the dominant mood of a film, e.g. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* the futuristic furniture and reduced color scheme stress the sterility and impersonality of the space station environment.
  - c. **Acting/Actors:** Do the actors look the part? This is called *typage*. Do they act natural and believable or some other way (melodramatic, exuberant Bollywood style, etc)? How are they spaced in the film?
  - d. **Costuming:** The clothes the actors wear signify character, e.g. In "Our Time is Up" the germ phobic girl is wearing red rimmed glasses to signify she sees danger everywhere.
  - e. **Other:** Scenery/Sets, Props, Deep Space (a lot of depth in the shot) shows distance, Shallow Space (characters near backdrop) shows claustrophobia, Off Screen Space (something is happening just off screen) often creates fear.
3. **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** How the camera man constructs his shot. The look of an image, its balance of dark and light, the depth of the space in focus, the relation of background and foreground, etc. all affect the reception of the image.
- a. **Framing/Shot Types:** A *shot* is a single take. An *Establishing Shot* is usually a long shot that helps to set the scene; it helps the spectator locate him or herself within the narrative of the film. It is often followed by a *mid-shot* (MS) then a *close-up* (CU). A *Subjective point-of-view shot* (POV) is an eye-line shot that allows the spectator to feel as if he or she is a part of the scene.
  - b. **Camera Angle:** *Eye-line match/high/low/tilt*. Camera angles always act to signify meaning, e.g. a subjective POV high angle shot can suggest superiority; a low angle shot can connote weakness.
  - c. **Camera Movement:** Zoom track/pan/hand-held Camera movement always creates significant meaning. A zoom into a close-up of a face can suggest emotion, a pan across a war scene can suggest widespread chaos; a POV tracking shot or a POV handheld camera shot can create tension and involvement by making the spectator feel as if he or she is a part of the action. A following shot pans or tracks (on rails or a wheeled platform - a 'dolly') to keep the subject in the shot. A hand-held shot can be kept from overly shaking by the use of a steadicam.
4. **EDITING:** Editing is the cutting and joining of lengths of film to place separate shots together yet still manage to suggest a sense of a continuing, connected and realistic flow of events and narrative. Editing is a way of compressing time and space or creating the effect of a dream sequence or flashback; it usually is 'seamless' and natural-seeming such that we tend not to even notice it.
- a. **Arranging Shots:** *Montage*: is an edited series of shots that works as an 'individual unit' of meaning greater than the individual scenes from which it is created; A *Sequence* is a series of shots (i.e. a montage) that leads up to a climax as in a story sequence; *Continuity editing*: refers to editing techniques that keep the sense of narrative flow such as matched or eye-line cuts.
  - b. **Cuts:** A *jump-cut* is a dramatic edit that breaks time / space continuity yet still appears continuous and 'natural'; an *MTV edit* is a rapid sequence of fast jump cuts that creates a conscious effect such as in music videos; a *cross-cut* follows action in two separate scenes; *Parallel action* allows two scenes to be viewed yet still retain the continuity and realism and uses cross cuts; a *follow-cut* follows action to its consequence, e.g. a character looking out cuts to what they look at; fades (sometimes to black) and dissolves create the sense of scenes moving forward; a sound-bridge carries sound across shots to tie them together.
  - c. **Sound:** The diegesis is the 'world of the film': if something is on the screen (including sounds from objects within the *mise-en-scène*) it is 'in the diegesis' or said to be 'diegetic'. Sound that is a part of the action is diegetic, e.g. wind noise, screeching cars, music from a radio, etc; sound that is added to create mood or atmosphere (orchestra, rock songs, etc) is non-diegetic. Diegetic sounds may, of course, also be dubbed after filming, or may be exaggerated for effect (e.g. loud footsteps, whistling wind, etc.).
  - d. **Visual Effects / SFX:** SFX ('special effects') often utilize computer-generated images (CGI) to create realism and meaning.

## Active Viewing Practice

**Directions:** Watch & re-watch the scene. Find evidence for each layer of meaning.

<b>Layers:</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>	<b>Claim/Explanation:</b>
<b>Narrative:</b> Internal Conflict Indirect Characterization Symbolism Allusion		
<b>Mise-En-Scene</b> Lighting Acting Costuming Decor		
<b>Cinematography</b> Framing Camera Angles Camera Movement		
<b>Editing</b> Cuts/Arrangement Sound Visual Effect		

**1. What is the BIG IDEA/CONCEPT the film addresses?** (Should be 1-2 words: love, loneliness, friendship):

**2. What is the theme?** (What does your evidence reveal about the big idea? What ideology is the film trying to get you to believe?)